

Judith Shea

Monuments and Statues

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

February 20–June 20, 1992



**Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris**

120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Gallery Hours

Monday–Saturday, 11:00 am–6:00 pm

Thursday, 11:00 am–7:30 pm

Free admission

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday–Saturday, 7:30 am–9:30 pm

Sunday, 11:00 am–7:00 pm

Gallery Talks

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 1:00 pm

Tours by appointment

For more information, call (212) 878-2453

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New York, New York 10021

At this particularly embattled moment in the history of Western culture, and in the aftermath of the toppling of national statuary in Eastern Europe, Judith Shea has set out to dissect the language of classical monuments. Her installation comprises a progression of three recent bronze sculptures and a new wood sculpture. Both valorizing and deconstructive, they exemplify the feminist impulse to revise history, intervening with the meaning of the monument while reinventing the life of a statue. These works also continue Shea's career-long contemplation of the relationship between the body and its covering. In the mid-1970s, she was among a group of artists who were reinvestigating the role of the figure in contemporary sculpture. For Shea, the enterprise continues, and her current pieces confront both the classical past and the imminent future of figurative sculpture.

With *Post Balzac* (1990), Shea creates a garment for Rodin's monumental head of Balzac. A long overcoat of patinated bronze, the sculpture is reminiscent of Shea's earlier bronze garments, which examined figuration by defining and depicting its void. Similarly, the presence of the body in *Post Balzac* is implied by its stark and dramatic absence. Again, covering is the device that Shea chooses instead of stark, plaintive figuration.

Classical sculpture began to inform Shea's work after she traveled to Greece and Italy in the mid-1980s. *Opus Notum Galateae Unum (The Only Known Work of Galatea)* (1991) is a draped, headless male figure. Critic Peter Schjeldahl reads the title as Shea's ironic revision – "that Pygmalion's famous creature had her own fling at magic-making sexual obsession." As he observes, Shea takes a turn at reversing roles, the female sculptor here creating the idealized man. Another work of the

same year, *Inside Venus*, refers to Venus de Milo. Shea takes the one-armed classical figure and gives her a silk garment which unfurls in front of her on the ground. The fabric of the garment provides a contrast with the draping of the sculpture, which Shea fashioned in bronze. By consciously opposing covering and uncovering, Shea also comments on the persistence and necessity of the depiction of the nude female form.

Object (1992) is a new sculpture in which Shea turns away from this critical inquiry into the past and moves into autobiography. The sculpture presents a life-size female body with a shock of pale horsehair reminiscent of Shea's own blond bob. *Object* is a subversive work; in it Shea seeks to create a monument, a cultural signifier, a historic marker, in the form of an average woman. The sculpture represents Shea's involvement in the creation of the female form, a traditionally male enterprise which is now at the forefront of feminist-inspired art practice. Neither a goddess or a saint, *Object* pierces and diverts the proverbial gaze. It confronts the viewer rather than remain a passive figure to be idolized and gazed upon. After a careful and methodical journey through the classical canon, Shea creates a monument to herself, empowered, imposing, and humanly imperfect.

Thelma Golden
Branch Director

Judith Shea

Born in Philadelphia, 1948

Studied at Parsons School of Design, New York (BFA, 1975)

Lives and works in Housatonic, Massachusetts, and New York

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1976

The Clocktower, Institute for Art and Urban Resources,
New York

1978

481, The Women's Center Gallery, Yale University, New Haven

1980

Willard Gallery, New York

1981

East Galleries, New York University

Willard Gallery, New York

1983

Dart Gallery, Chicago

Willard Gallery, New York

1984

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Willard Gallery, New York

1985

Hayden Gallery, List Visual Arts Center

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge (traveled)

Knight Gallery, Charlotte, North Carolina

1986

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia

Willard Gallery, New York

1988

La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California

Curt Marcus Gallery, New York

1989

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri

1990

John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco

Greenberg Gallery Annex, St. Louis

The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

1991

Max Protetch Gallery, New York

Works in the exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Post Balzac, 1990 (facing page)

Cast bronze, 101 x 28 1/2 x 28 1/2

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Pappajohn

Inside Venus, 1991 (cover)

Cast bronze and fabric, 101 x 28 1/2 x 28 1/2

Collection of the artist; courtesy of

Max Protetch Gallery, New York

Opus Notum Galateae Unum

(*The Only Known Work of Galatea*), 1991

Cast bronze, 74 x 17 1/2 x 17 1/2

Collection of the artist; courtesy of

Max Protetch Gallery, New York

The Object, 1992

Wood and horsehair, 100 x 26 1/2 x 26 1/2

Collection of the artist

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Printing: Eastern Press

Photography: Dennis Cowley



